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Towards a sociology of recurrent events. Constellations of cultural change around Eurovision in 18 countries (1981–2021)

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ABSTRACT

Sociologists usually conceptualize events as unexpected occurrences bringing about long-lasting transformations of social structures. Following this definition, most empirical studies of events focus on pre/post-measurement strategies. Yet not all events are unexpected (e.g., Eurovision, Oscar nominations, the Olympics). Moreover, pre/post-measurements cannot capture the temporality in which meaning-making processes unfold nor account for the overlap between various events. We address these shortcomings by introducing the concept of ‘recurrent events,’ defined as events occurring with regular and recurrent cadence, charging collective effervescence and anticipation among audiences. Drawing from resonance theory, we conceptualize constellations of cultural change happening around recurrent events. We provide an empirical proof-of-concept, focusing on the case of the Eurovision Song Contest. To do so, we build a unique dataset of Eurovision lyrics and public attitudes in 18 European countries between 1981 and 2021 to study the relationships between attitudes about sexual and gender identity and national identity and the corresponding narratives presented at Eurovision. Our findings complicate common assumptions about the duality of events, by highlighting six different configurations of cultural change. We demonstrate how the concept of recurrent events contributes to the literature on events, consider the theoretical and methodological implications, and provide recommendations for future research.

1. Introduction

Existing sociological literature mostly considers events as unexpected happenings bringing about major transformations of social structures (Sewell, 2005). Typical examples of such events are the taking of the Bastille during the French revolution (Sewell, 2005), the fall of the Berlin wall (Sonnevend, 2016), and 9/11 (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010). Yet not all events share a focus on radical change and not all events are unexpected. Examples of events that fall out of this definition include presidential addresses, Oscar nominations, and the Olympic Games (Billings et al., 2013; Vaccari et al., 2015). Moreover, the literature on unexpected events has mainly focused on the measurement of pre/post-conditions; a strategy that has been criticized for not considering the temporality in which

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meaning-making processes unfold and for its inability to distinguish between overlapping events (van Dooremalen, 2021; van Dooremalen & Uitermark, 2021). In increasingly mediatized societies, where media technologies facilitate the organization of and participation at events, a sole focus on unexpected events and on major structural transformation falls short of capturing a great portion of events that pattern the course of everyday life.

To fill this gap, we theorize about what we call *recurrent events*. In line with Berezin, we define these as “phenomena with sufficient identity and coherence that the social collectivity recognizes them as discrete and important” (Berezin, 2012, p. 615), occurring with repeated, planned, and regular cadence, charging collective effervescence and anticipation among their audiences. In particular, our focus is on mediated recurrent events and on the empirical case of the Eurovision Song Contest as one of the largest and most popular cases of this class of events (Yair, 2019). While the appeal of studying unexpected events lies in their potential to clearly define a before and an after (van Dooremalen & Uitermark, 2021), recurrent events are important to study precisely because they are firmly embedded within the ordinary construction of social life. Such embeddedness requires a theoretical and empirical move away from pre/post-understandings of events and towards a more dynamic investigation of constellations of cultural change, which we develop in this article by drawing from resonance theory (Schudson, 1989). In particular, we define constellations as different configurations and trajectories that cultural change can take. Such constellations depend upon the category of events under scrutiny. A focus on unexpected events prompts an analysis of change with specific characteristics in terms of temporal developments (e.g., fast and chaotic) and magnitude (e.g., strong and long-lasting change). Recurrent events, instead, require a different theoretical perspective that accounts for processes of convergence and divergence between the actors involved in processes of cultural change. In this article, we propose a focus on resonance as a key theoretical perspective enabling such a reading (Schudson, 1989).

Specifically, our goal in this article is to (1) conceptualize recurrent events, (2) devise a theoretical framework for studying this class of events, and (3) put this framework to work in an empirical proof-of-concept by mapping the various constellations of cultural change around the Eurovision Song Contest. To do so, we study the dynamics of cultural change around Eurovision across 18 European countries between 1981 and 2021 through novel computational methods. We first classify lyrics of the songs participating in the semifinals and finals of the Eurovision contest through the Concept Mover’s Distance algorithm (CMD, Stoltz & Taylor, 2019) to understand the extent to which Eurovision displays narratives in favor of inclusive views about two topics that are central at Eurovision, namely sexual and gender identity and national identity (Baker, 2008, 2017). We subsequently match these narratives with public attitudes around these topics in the corresponding countries to chart their trajectories in relation to the lyrics of songs presented at Eurovision.

Our results indicate the presence of six different constellations of cultural change, nuancing previously held assumptions about the duality of events (i.e., the “tension between change and sustenance”, Berezin, 2012, p. 316), typically conceived and studied mostly in relation to unexpected events. By considering resonance as a mechanism of alignment between events and social beliefs, we stress the importance of considering mediated recurrent events as a specific class of events. We conclude by reflecting on the implications for the study of events and by highlighting the prolific uses of resonance theory to better understand cultural change through recurrent events.

2. Conceptualizing recurrent events


2.1. Recurrent events

Social life is patterned by a multiplicity of occurrences, such as parliamentary discussions, religious and civil festivities, and historical celebrations (Wynn, 2016). Not all these occurrences can be seen as events. For example, daily meetings held by a country’s government to discuss political decisions are part and parcel of the habitual functioning of the political system. They do not disrupt the daily flow of life, nor are they an opportunity for reassessing, reestablishing, or further elaborating previously held beliefs. This particular focus on the disruption of everyday life is what brought event scholars to define events as moments of profound changes (Sewell, 2005). That is, occurrences become events when they profoundly disrupt social structures, when they are perceived as a break from the habitual fabric of social life (Aquino et al., 2022). Although various accounts have nuanced our understanding of events as being restless (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010) and as templates of possibilities (Berezin, 2012), the common tenet of the event literature is that events are unexpected and profoundly disruptive (Hoffman & Bearman, 2015). For example, it is common practice, even in recent scholarship about events, to define them as “the consolidation of a moment of rupture in a form” (Rekenthaler, 2023, p. 1). This is also evidenced by the choice of what is studied as an event, such as 9/11 (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010; van Dooremalen, 2021), the Covid-19 pandemic (Rekenthaler, 2023), or the taking of the Bastille (Sewell, 2005).

Yet, this definition of events falls short in two regards. First, it does not capture all classes of events, as there are occasions that are highly charged with symbolic values, filled with meanings given by the communities participating in them, and with important implications for the structuring and restructuring of social life which are, nevertheless, not unexpected. Second, the definition of events uniquely focuses on moments of disruption, however generative these moments can be, disregarding the potential nature of events as generative forces of social order. That is, some events occur regularly and function as moments of collective (re)definition, charged with symbolic and social effervescence so that their very existence gives meaning to the communities participating in them. Some key examples are the Sunday mass, national elections in democratic countries, sport events like the Olympics, and cultural events like Eurovision. Such events are instances of what we conceptualize as “recurrent events”, namely events that occur with regular cadence. Following traditional definitions of events, recurrent events are events to the extent that they are “a ramified sequence of occurrences” (Sewell, 1996, p. 844), meaningful to their participants (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010), and relevant in the “tension between change and sustenance” (Berezin, 2012, p. 616). Specifically, recurrent events are characterized by three main aspects.

First, they are *repeated*. They happen multiple times and their relationship with social structures strictly depends upon this

Table 1
Examples of different categories of events based on their expectedness.

Expectedness	Event type	Examples
	Shock	9/11, Covid-19 pandemic
	Focus	hackers' attacks, mass shootings
	Non-recurrent planned	wedding Charles and Diana, funeral JFK
	Recurrent	Eurovision, Ramadan

temporality. While it is the exceptionality of unexpected events that is theorized to bring about profound changes, recurrent events are relevant precisely because of their temporal persistence.

Second, they are *planned*. That is, those taking part in recurrent events, such as athletes, musicians, politicians, fans of a sports team or their national Eurovision representative, know in advance and plan for their participation to the event. Emotions of collective effervescence, ritualistic behaviors, and social evaluation become charged in the anticipation for the event (Coudry, 2003). This also means that typical measurement strategies based on pre-/post- evaluations are particularly ineffective in the case of recurrent events. What is generally conceived as the “effect” in unexpected events can also take shape before the event in the case of recurrent events, as moments of self and social definition also happen in the anticipation of the event.

Third, they are *regular*. Recurrent events are meaningful because they pattern and give regular cadence to the flow of social life, for example by happening each year (e.g., Eurovision), every four years (e.g., US presidential elections), or on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after March 21st (e.g., Easter). Without them, the participating communities would be alienated from the sources giving meaning to their everyday lives, they would feel as if the foundations and the social fabric that they rely upon were removed from below their feet.

Such a categorization singles recurrent events as a specific category of events, different from unexpected ones because of their recurrency, planning, and regularity. Recurrent events also differ compared to other categories used to define the social organization of processes of meaning-making, such as occasions (Wynn, 2016) and rituals (Turner, 1967). Wynn (2016, p. 277) defines occasions as social situations characterized by “(1) resources (i.e., economic, physical, social + human, and symbolic), (2) patterns (i.e., confetti, core, and citadel), and (3) properties (i.e., longevity, repetition, porosity, density, and turbulence).” In this category of events, “repetition” is a characteristic shared with recurrent events. Yet, occasions and recurrent events define different types of social situations. Occasions are social situations as understood from an interactionalist perspective: “a social occasion provides the structuring social context in which many situations and their gatherings are likely to form, dissolve and re-form, while a pattern of conduct tends to be recognized” (Goffman, 1963, p. 18). In this perspective, occasions are theorized to produce cultural change by focusing on the interactional dynamics (e.g., their “longevity, repetition, porosity, density, and turbulence,” Wynn, 2016, p. 281) of social situations. Instead, recurrent events constitute a more institutionally organized and socially ritualized type of social situation. Whilst more structured than accidental encounters or gatherings, occasions are less institutionalized and ritualized than recurrent events. Finally, while some occasions share some characteristics with events (e.g., the presence of a large audience for the funeral of a famous person, the re-occurrence of a birthday party), they can also be attended by small audiences and happen only once (e.g., a family dinner to celebrate an important achievement).

Recurrent events also differ from rituals, as not all recurrent events are rituals and not all rituals are recurrent events. Rituals have been defined as “(a) predefined sequences characterized by rigidity, formality, and repetition that are (b) embedded in a larger system of symbolism and meaning, but (c) contain elements that lack direct instrumental purpose” (Hobson et al., 2018, p. 261). Accordingly, while some recurrent events can be seen as rituals, such as the Sunday Mass, not all events are rituals—although some recurrent events can be composed by ritualistic behaviors (e.g., wearing a specific clothing item while attending Eurovision). In addition, rituals are not necessarily repetitive and do not necessarily pattern individuals' lives by creating expectedness but by disrupting it. For example, a marriage could be seen as a ritual that disrupts one's life by defining a before and an after. Yet, a marriage is meant to be celebrated only once and it is not meant to be formally celebrated with regularity. In this perspective, recurrent events capture a unique portion of social life that is not captured by occasions nor rituals, although the three concepts can coincide at times or be part of each other.

Introducing the concept of recurrent events allows to nuance our understanding of events based on their expectedness. In this perspective, events could be arranged on a continuum, ranging from totally unexpected to totally expected. The most unexpected cases are shock events such as 9/11 or the Covid-19 pandemic, while the most expected ones are recurrent events, like Eurovision or the Olympics. In between, focus events describe those events that are expected by many because similar ones have happened before, but are not planned (van Dooremalen, 2021). For example, in societies like the US, a mass shooting constitutes a focus event, meaning that a toolkit of response repertoires (Lamont & Thévenot, 2000) for politicians and media is in place for when they happen even if the timing of the event remains unknown. Finally, non-recurrent planned events, such as Charles and Diana's wedding or JFK's funeral, describe those events that are not as expected as recurrent events because they happen just once or on occasion (i.e., non-recurrent),

yet they are defined by some degree of expectedness given that they are planned. Table 1 below provides examples for each category of events described so far according to their degree of expectedness.

2.2. Mediated and non-mediated types of recurrent events

In mediatized societies, events are increasingly happening online (e.g., in livestreams) or through the mediation of technology (e.g., televised) (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Media events have been defined as “the festive viewing of television” (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 1) or, more precisely, as “a [televised or streamed] ceremony [that] interrupts the flow of daily life [...], deals reverently with sacred matters [...], and involves the response [...] of a committed audience” (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 14). In their original definition, media events have been characterized by various aspects, such as the interruption of routine (i.e., regular broadcasting is interrupted to make space for the event), the live broadcasting (i.e., not pre-recorded and including elements of uncertainty), the preplanning of their organization (i.e., advanced announcements and advertisements), the organization outside of the media (i.e., the organizers are not media organizations, which are instead involved in the broadcasting of the event), the presence of reverence and ceremonies (i.e., inclusion of prizes and recognitions), and the capability of electrifying very large audiences (Dayan & Katz, 1992, pp. 5–9). Accordingly, events such as the Eurovision, the Olympics, and the Superbowl could be seen as media events to the extent that they are “an intensely popular social occasion with broad economic and political significance for the host city/nation as reflected in the event’s tendency to be manufactured as an ‘official’ version of public culture” (Baker & Rowe, 2014, p. 302).

Media events can be further distinguished between recurrent (e.g., Eurovision) and non-recurrent (e.g., the wedding of Charles and Diana) media events. In both cases, the event is pre-planned and not unexpected. Nevertheless, similarly as unexpected events, non-recurrent media events can constitute moments of strong cultural changes (e.g., 9/11). Moreover, it is possible to further distinguish mediated from non-mediated recurrent events. The main difference between the two lies in the fact that while the former require a mediatized airing to happen and to have broad social significance, the latter do not. For example, religious festivities, such as Easter and Ramadan, political elections, and music festivals are among the many recurrent events that do not necessarily require a mediatized airing to happen. On the contrary, while also being attended by publics present in person, recurrent events like Eurovision, the Olympics, or the Superbowl would not be the same if they were not aired. Their social meaning and relevance depend on their mediatized nature, in the creation of online communities that discuss and share opinions before, during, and after the event, on the capacity of technological broadcasting to reach massive audiences, and on the simultaneous participation of international audiences creating globalized cultures (Roche, 2000).

2.3. Eurovision as a case of mediated recurrent events

Started in 1956 by the European Broadcasting Union, the Eurovision Song Contest is the longest-running annual international televised music competition. The contest has frequently been considered as an important venue to understand international relationships, especially among European countries, as well as political and cultural climates (Ariely & Zahavi, 2022; Pyka, 2019), especially around issues of national identity (Baker, 2008), queerness, and non-heteronormativity (Baker, 2017).

In this article, we focus on Eurovision for three main reasons. First, along with the Olympics or the Superbowl, Eurovision is one of the world’s largest mediated recurrent events, in terms of organizational infrastructure, audience internationality, and audience size (Yair, 2019).

Second, Eurovision produces clearly defined cultural objects, like song lyrics, which are more densely symbolic than, for example, athletic performances at the Olympics. That is, Eurovision produces cultural objects as an integral part of the event itself, which are not present in other mediated recurrent events of such size and reach. A similar production of cultural objects as part of the event also occurs in national song contests (e.g., Sanremo in Italy, which is recurrent and mediatized but not as large as Eurovision) or at music and film festivals (e.g., the Cannes film festival, which is recurrent and large, but not mediatized).

Third, the narratives presented at Eurovision are chosen through national processes of artistic selection, political interests, and televoting, which make such narratives the product of nation-specific collective processes. In this sense, the narratives present in the music lyrics at Eurovision are cultural objects generated by collective processes of meaning-making, they are “‘official’ versions of public culture” (Baker & Rowe, 2014, p. 302). Eurovision is therefore an ideal case to study cultural change around mediatized recurrent events, as also testified by the substantial literature produced around this topic (Ariely & Zahavi, 2022; Miazhevich, 2017).

3. Theorizing cultural change in recurrent events

The study of cultural change around events has focused on their duality, defined as the “tension between change and sustenance” (Berezin, 2012, p. 316). Events have the capacity of making tangible the distinction between the situation in which they unfold and the potential developments that could emerge after their conclusion (or long after, Wagner-Pacifci, 2010; van Dooremalen & Uitermark, 2021). In this sense, they have been seen as “templates of possibility” (Berezin, 2012), as situations that highlight existing social beliefs and indicate new possibilities to rearrange them. This malleability can also be found at the Eurovision Song Contest.

Eurovision has been often discussed as “♦a cultural text *mobilizing* representations of collective geo-political identities (of ‘Europe’, and individual nations) and a material production *embedded* in political/financial interests” (Baker, 2017, p. 98, italics added). In other words, Eurovision has been studied as an event embedded within national and international cultures and, at the same time, one that promotes change through novel cultural narratives (Ginsburgh & Noury, 2008) and enables shifts in social beliefs about gender and sexuality (Heller, 2007).

Whereas past research on Eurovision has asked whether the event can trail from (embedding) or lead (mobilizing) social beliefs, the leading or trailing relationship between events and social beliefs has been a thorny issue, both theoretically and empirically. Most of the existing literature has focused on unexpected or non-recurrent planned events and studied the role of events in relation to cultural change by measuring differences between pre and post conditions (Larsen et al., 2020; Semetko et al., 2003). This literature suffers from two major shortcomings. First, it ignores the different roles that recurrent and unexpected events have for the patterning of social life. While unexpected events gain much of their transformative power from their unexpectedness, this cannot be said for recurrent events. They gain signification through different mechanisms, for example because surprise and disruption are less central in recurrent events, which are instead characterized by anticipation and ritualistic behaviors. Thus, it is key to shift balance, and pay careful attention to the study of recurrent events. Second, even in relation to unexpected events, the strategy of measuring cultural change through pre- and post-conditions has been criticized for not being able to account for intervening factors (e.g., co-occurrence of other events), for focusing on relatively short periods of time before and after the event—ignoring the potential re-articulation and stratification of interpretations after longer periods of time—, and for lacking systematic empirical approaches for the study of their relationship with social beliefs (van Dooremalen & Uitermark, 2021).

To address these issues, we theorize and empirically study the role of convergence and divergence between social beliefs and events' narratives, more broadly. Rather than trying to measure event effects, by focusing on recurrent events, we analyze the co-constitutive relationships between temporal trends. In particular, we do not aim to partake in exogenous or endogenous explanations of culture (Kaufman, 2004). That is, we do not aim to explain cultural change, providing a rationale or account for why and how cultural change happens. Moreover, we do not focus on processes of meaning-making per se, providing accounts of how meanings are created or interpreted. Instead, we are more specifically interested in defining a concept—that of recurrent events—which encapsulates a specific view of cultural change, one that develops through repeated, planned, and regularly organized events, rather than through unexpected or non-recurrent planned ones.

Our point of departure, shared among event scholars interested in cultural change (Steinmetz, 2008), is to understand the conditions that bring Eurovision (as a specific type of mediated recurrent events) to be a context for cultural change around two topics that characterize this competition, namely sexual and gender identity and national identity. More specifically, we see recurrent events such as Eurovision as potentially generative of cultural change because they define what Aspers and Godart (2013, p. 185) called a “backdrop of order.” That is, while cultural change is often conceived as a rupture in the social order (Aspers & Godart, 2013), we see recurrent events as those very structures generative of such order. In so doing, they clarify the boundaries between order and disruption, allowing for the enactment of change against such order. Although we specifically focus on Eurovision as a case of mediated recurrent events, the approach developed below is applicable to any class of recurrent events as it focuses on their temporal persistence, planning, and regularity.

3.1. Studying resonant events

Lacking an overarching definition, resonance has generally been considered as a process through which narratives “click” with (cultural dimension) and/or “strike a chord” (emotional dimension) (Baden & David, 2018, p. 529) in audiences because of a similarity between cultural content and its audiences. In this perspective, resonance develops through processes of correspondence and similarity, and assumes a fluctuating process between conditions of alignment (i.e., similarity) and misalignment (i.e., dissimilarity) (Schudson, 1989). Most of the existing literature about resonance has focused on the social, mediatic, and cognitive internalization of messages (e.g., Ferree, 2003; Klimmt & Rieger, 2021; Shrum et al., 2011) and on everyday practices of meaning-making (e.g., McDonnell et al., 2017; Park et al., 2021). In relation to events, the concept of resonance has been mobilized in various ways: a) to understand the potential impact that events have on audiences (Wagner-Pacific, 2010); b) as a mechanism through which the narratives presented at the event allow audiences to reflect upon central challenges of their time (Sonnevend, 2016, p. 33); c) as a mechanism of coupling between the availability of public narratives and their presentation by performers to achieve desired effects on audiences (i.e., to strike “a responsive chord with the audience”, Liang, 2017, p. 402); and d) to understand the differential adoption between Democrats and Republicans of the “wave” metaphor in the construction of Covid-19 as an event (Rekenthaler, 2023).

In this paper, we employ the concept of resonance to shift focus from the concept of crisis—central in unexpected and non-recurrent planned events—to that of misalignment. Indeed, resonance has typically been considered to stem from situations to puzzle out—moments of misalignment and meaning-making (McDonnell et al., 2017; Park et al., 2021). Considering recurrent events as repeated, planned, and regular means that, in relation to this category of events, cultural change does not happen through sudden crises, but through gradual, multidirectional, and non-linear trajectories of transition from misalignment (i.e., dissimilarity) toward alignment (i.e., similarity). The misalignment characterizing recurrent events can be seen as the ongoing manifestation of cultural change that patterns and is manifested in these events—rather than as their disruptive outcomes, as in unexpected events (Mijis et al., 2022; van Dooremalen, 2021). Misaligned or dissimilar conditions in the case of Eurovision are present, for example, in countries where social beliefs are widely discriminatory (e.g., widespread homophobia), while narratives—such as those presented at Eurovision—promote inclusivity (e.g., lyrics celebrating queerness).

The case of Conchita Wurst is a clear example of how situations of misalignment represent resonant contexts, potentially generative of cultural change. Coming from Austria, a national context characterized by a widespread discrimination and skepticism towards the queer community (Sani & Quaranta, 2022), Conchita Wurst won the 2014 edition of Eurovision with “Rise Like a Phoenix”, a song that builds from experiences of public shame and discrimination to inspire redemption through pride and recognition. In this sense, “Rise Like a Phoenix” is a song written and presented at Eurovision because of its embeddedness in existing conditions lived by the Austrian queer community in specific, and the queer community more in general. It was a case of strong misalignment between widely held

social beliefs and cultural representations. The victory of this song brought an even greater attention to these topics, because of the massive reach made possible by the broadcasting of the event but also because of the subsequent activism led by Conchita Wurst, as shown in her speeches at the European Parliament and United Nations, respectively held on October 8th and November 3rd of the same year. Without overstressing the importance of this victory, the 2014 edition of the Eurovision can be seen as a mediated recurrent event that enabled the circulation of more liberal discourses about queerness, facilitating the formation of a context in which same-sex marriages became eventually legal in 2019 (Sani & Quaranta, 2022).

4. Methodology

4.1. Data sources and extraction

This paper is based on two data sources.¹ The first is a unique dataset of Eurovision lyrics, which we built following four steps. First, we used the publicly available *European Song Contest Database* to scrape the song title, artists' names, and countries represented for each song featured in the final and semifinal rounds of every Eurovision contest since its inception in 1956 ($n = 1903$). Second, we scraped the lyrics of each song using public sources. Due to the age and rarity of certain songs, we were not able to find a single source for all lyrics; instead, we relied on two widely known Eurovision lyrics websites, 4LYRICS and Eurovisionworld. In case of missing lyrics, we committed to manually searching the Internet. The number of songs for which lyrics were retrieved is 1603 (84 %). In a third step, we translated the full text of all lyrics to English using the EasyNMT package in Python (version 2.0.0, Reimers, 2021) to facilitate common computational analysis. In the fourth and final step, we followed common pre-processing procedure by removing punctuation, lowercasing, and removing stop words (using the snowball stopword list²) from each lyric (Reber, 2018). We did not lemmatize because, as suggested by Stoltz and Taylor (2019, pp. 299–300), “the fastText embeddings are neither stemmed nor lemmatized and doing so needlessly reduces semantic information (and without a noticeable boost in performance).”

The second source is the European Values Survey, 1981–2020, containing demographic and opinion data for 223,099 citizens across 49 European countries over a 40-year period. Our second source is an original dataset of Eurovision lyrics that we constructed through automatic and manual steps. To prepare the EVS data for our analysis, we took the following steps. Of the 49 European countries included in the EVS, we selected only those that participated at Eurovision since its beginning ($n = 18$), namely, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Further, given scarce data availability for Greece, Switzerland, and Turkey, we supplemented EVS with World Value Survey (WVS, Inglehart et al., 2022) data. This choice was guided by three reasons: (1) EVS is chosen as the main dataset because it has more complete data than WVS for the selected countries (e.g., Belgium is not included in the WVS); (2) since we are aggregating data at the country-period level, the inclusion of participants from another data source does not compromise the longitudinal interpretation of the data; (3) the two surveys ask the exact same question for the two focal variables measuring social beliefs toward sexual and gender identity (specifically focused on homosexuality) and national identity (see below). We focused on homosexuality as a proxy to measure sexual and gender identity because of data availability (the surveys only asked questions about homosexuality) and because discussions about homosexuality have been present for longer in the general public than those related to other types of sexual and gender identities (e.g., pansexual, non-binary; Bronski, 2012).

4.2. Measures

Lyrics. We measured the valence of topics about homosexuality and national identity in lyrics using semantically directed Concept Mover's Distance scores (function *CMD* from package *text2map*, version: 0.1.6; Rversion: 4.0.4). Negative values indicate that a song has an exclusive valence towards the topic; a value of 0 indicates neutral valence; and positive values indicate inclusive valence. As with inclusionary beliefs, we centered and standardized all variables by country. (Overall empirical range_{ni}: -1.9; 1.8; $M_{ni} = 0$; $SD_{ni} = 1$; and overall empirical range_{homo}: -1.7; 2.0; $M_{homo} = 0$; $SD_{homo} = 1$).

Social beliefs. To measure social beliefs in each country and period, we drew on two variables from the EVS and WVS that indicate inclusionary beliefs towards homosexuality and national identity. Both are part of a single set of response items based on the same question: “On this list are various groups of people. Could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbors?”. To gauge inclusionary beliefs toward homosexuality, we considered responses that indicate an unwillingness to have “Homosexuals” as neighbors. To measure inclusionary national identity beliefs, we took responses indicating an unwillingness to have as neighbors “Immigrants/foreign workers”. To get inclusive beliefs, we reverse-coded the original response categories which are simply “0” for not a problem and “1” for a problem. As such, the variable mean for each country-period gives the proportion of people without exclusionary beliefs toward homosexuality and national identity, respectively. To aid visual presentation and analysis, both variables were centered and standardized by country. (Overall empirical range_{ni}: -1.3; 1.4; $M_{ni} = 0$; $SD_{ni} = 1$. and overall empirical range_{homo}: -1.5; 1.2; $M_{homo} = 0$; $SD_{homo} = 1$).

¹ Data and syntax can be found at the following link: https://osf.io/qejkx/?view_only=729466ffa6254cb592d6b3e299cb94c1.

² http://snowball.tartarus.org/dist/snowball_all.tgz.

4.3. Analytical procedure

To address our research questions, we followed two analytical steps. First, we employed Concept Mover’s Distance (CMD) to classify how closely each song is associated to the inclusive semantic direction of the concepts of homosexuality and national identity (Taylor & Stoltz, 2021). CMD is a semi-supervised method that builds on Word Mover’s Distance (Kusner et al., 2015) to classify documents based on “the minimum cost that a document’s embedded words need to travel to arrive at the position of all the words in an ideal ‘pseudo document’ consisting of only words denoting a specified concept” (Stoltz & Taylor, 2019, p. 294). To illustrate, CMD has been previously used to study the content of music reviews (Daenekindt & Schaap, 2022) and popular lyrics (Carbone & Mijs, 2022). Here we use a version of CMD that considers semantic directions, namely the distinction of the focal concept along a spectrum with binary opposite terms (e.g., positive/negative, high/low, Taylor & Stoltz, 2021). This allows us to define how closely associated each lyric is to the inclusive connotation of the focal concepts of interest. To measure each concepts’ semantic direction, we used the following antonym pairs for homosexuality (positive: homophilia, survivor, living; negative: homophobia, casualty, dying) and national identity (positive: antiracism, xenophilia, tolerance; negative: racism, xenophobia, intolerance).

As in other automatic methods, the classification of lyrics through CMD has the advantage of reliable estimates at the expense of a lower validity (Nelson, 2020; Matthes & Kohring, 2008). That is, following automatic procedures, researchers know that the estimates will be the same, or very similar, across multiple runs. At the same time, they have a lower validity than those classified by human beings, because of contextual meanings, metaphors, and other figures of speech that are crucial in giving sense to the text but are not necessarily captured by automatic approaches (van Atteveldt et al., 2021). Despite of the limitations intrinsic to automatic methods of text classification, we are confident that our approach can capture the intrinsic meaning of lyrics for two reasons. First, we used CMD with a corpus that was pre-trained on Common Crawl data using fastText English embeddings. Common Crawl is a vast and heterogeneous source of information that crawls web archives and freely provides their data to the public. By using Common Crawl as a source for the pre-trained data, we rely on a database of large and heterogenous sources, which allows to capture different perspectives on the topics of interest. In short, this allows to capture degrees of semantic closure to concepts as conceptualized in public forms of culture (Lizardo, 2017). Second, to ensure the validity of the classification, we established inter-coder reliability. This was done by first understanding how we, as humans, make sense of the song, namely whether we considered it as about the topic and, eventually, in which direction (i.e., towards inclusion or exclusion). Subsequently, we considered how the algorithm behind CMD works, focusing on vectors of words and similarity between vectors. That is, even if a song is not fully about homosexuality, a text including words such as love, freedom, and self-expression would be classified as closer to that topic (in the direction of inclusion) compared to a text with words such as death, hate, and exclusion. By combining these two readings and relying more on the human interpretation of the song, the first three authors evaluated first together a sample of songs to understand how to combine human and algorithmic components (Baden et al., 2022). Subsequently, they individually coded a sub-sample of songs for each topic (20 songs per topic randomly chosen,



Fig. 1. Over-time developments of inclusive beliefs towards sexual and gender identity in narratives and social beliefs. Note: the y axis represents scaled and centered means across all countries and periods on a 0–1 scale.

10 with CMD scores below the first quartile and 10 above the third quartile, total $n = 40$) to evaluate inter-coder reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{hom}} = 0.73$; Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{ni}} = 0.75$).

After having classified the lyrics, we subsequently evaluated the resonance of contexts by (1) grouping countries based on whether lyrical narratives or social beliefs have been more inclusionary over time (i.e., consistently higher than the other), and subsequently by (2) looking at which of the two dimensions converges towards the other. Constellations of cultural change were evaluated based on grouping countries with similar trajectories in the relationships between lyrical narratives and social beliefs. By matching data about social beliefs present in the EVS and WVS surveys with those about event's narratives present in the lyrics, our analyses focused on the period between 1981 and 2021 because EVS and WVS data are only available since 1981.

5. Results: constellations of cultural change

To present the results of our analyses, Figs. 1 and 2 below show the trends in developments of social beliefs and narratives about sexual and gender identity and national identity. To present the constellations of cultural change, we focus on each topic separately in what follows.

Sexual and gender identity. On the topic of sexual and gender identity, Fig. 1 provides a visual aid to distinguish between three clusters of countries representing three different constellations of cultural change. A first cluster comprises Austria, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Turkey; countries where the lyrics presented at Eurovision have been consistently more inclusive than the social beliefs in the population. The trends in these countries represent contexts of leading resonance, where beliefs gradually catch up and align with the narratives presented at the contest, that has been predominantly more inclusive about sexual and gender identity. The only exception in this cluster is Turkey, where beliefs did not show any signs of alignment with the narratives over time. Among these countries, we see artists bringing progressive perspectives at Eurovision as trailblazers for their own countries, as the case of Conchita Wurst clearly shows. Another example in this context would be the Italian band *Måneskin*, winner of the 2021 edition, who have acquired notoriety also for their frequent challenging of gender and sexual norms that are widely present in Italian society. In these countries, narratives and social beliefs gradually align, showing conditions of leading resonance, where Eurovision is a forerunner of cultural change.



Fig. 2. Over-time developments of inclusive beliefs towards national identity in narratives and social beliefs. Note: the y axis represents scaled and centered means across all countries and periods on a 0–1 scale.

Table 2
Constellations of cultural change.

Topic	Diverging	Stable	Fully-Converging	Partially-Converging (Leading)	Leading	Trailing
Sexual and Gender Identity	Turkey	Denmark			Malta	Finland
	Netherlands	Sweden			Italy	Greece
	Norway				Portugal	
	Belgium				Austria	
	France				Germany	
	Switzerland				Ireland	
	UK				Spain	
National Identity	Turkey		Denmark	Finland	Belgium	Sweden
	Italy		France	Ireland	Germany	Switzerland
	Malta		Netherlands		UK	
	Greece		Portugal			
	Norway		Spain			

A second cluster comprises countries where social beliefs are consistently higher than narratives, namely Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. Among these countries, we do not see situations of resonance, as narratives, although generally increasing, tend to diverge (i.e., the Netherlands, Norway) or to remain stable (i.e., Denmark, Sweden) from the increasingly inclusive trajectories of beliefs. The only exception in this context seems to be Finland, where beliefs and narratives increase more inclusively over time, although they never fully align. Episodes like Finnish artists sharing a lesbian kiss in 2013 and the coming out of Finnish artist Saara Malto in 2016 could indeed be representative of a trailing resonant context, where supportive narratives displayed at the contest trail from widespread inclusive beliefs towards sexual and gender identity that were widely present in this second cluster.

Finally, a third cluster is composed by countries where narratives and social beliefs oscillate around each other over time. This cluster includes Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Among these countries, we see situations of divergence (i.e., Belgium, France, Switzerland, the UK), where beliefs and narratives seem to follow independent paths and to potentially represent situations of cultural change that are guided by external influences. For example, the UK saw a gradual increase in inclusive social beliefs toward sexual and gender identity, while the narratives presented at Eurovision have been increasingly more exclusionary. We also see situations of convergence (i.e., Germany, Greece, Ireland, and Spain), where narratives and beliefs align and maintain a close similarity in the valence towards sexual and gender identity. All these cases suggest the presence of leading resonant contexts, where beliefs tend to align with the more inclusive narratives. The only exception is Greece, representing a context of trailing resonance, where narratives have drastically increased over the years, catching up with more inclusive beliefs. Interestingly, the narratives seem to follow a slight downward trajectory, converging towards the beliefs in the last periods (i.e., 2002–2021).

National identity. For what concerns the topic of national identity, we again distinguish between three clusters of countries (Fig. 2). A first cluster, where narratives are consistently higher than social beliefs, consists of Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Malta, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Among these countries, we see diverging trends (i.e., Austria, Italy, Malta, Turkey) as well as converging ones (i.e., Belgium, Germany, and the UK). Countries where there is convergence show situations of leading resonance, where narratives about national identity are, over time, matched by social beliefs. For example, it is interesting to notice that the song “Desire”, performed by Maltese artist Claudette Pace won Eurovision in the 2000 edition. A former colony of the British Empire, Malta was one of the few countries allowed to use English in the period between 1977 and 1999. Right after this period, the song “Desire”—a song which references to rivers and mountains could well signify a desire for one’s own land, together with the more explicit desire for a partner or lover—used three lines in Maltese. This use of the language happened in the same period in which we register small increases in the lyrical closure to the topic of national identity. At the same time, this same period saw a marked decrease in national identity beliefs, potentially signaling the use of English—the lingua franca for cultural, social, and economical participation in Europe—as a tool for cultural participation and inclusion. As we further discuss in the discussion, the underlying explanations for the relationships found in each constellation of change require country- and period-specific analyses to be fully disentangled.

A second cluster, where social beliefs are consistently higher than narratives, is composed by Sweden and Switzerland. These two countries are quite stable in their trends, with beliefs starting from a lower valence but immediately overcoming narratives and maintaining their higher valence throughout the rest of the period. Such a situation represents a mild case of trailing resonance, where beliefs and narratives are matched but without any situation of strong misalignment (i.e., the initial overturn still departs from a small misalignment), mostly characterized by congruence and stability.

Finally, the cluster where social beliefs and narratives are in constant fluctuation is composed by Denmark, France, Finland, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and Spain. In this cluster, we can distinguish countries where trends are fully converging (i.e., Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain), partially converging (i.e., Finland, Ireland), and diverging (i.e., Greece, Norway). In fully converging countries we see beliefs and narratives continuously oscillating around each other, representing strong instances of resonance, without a clear distinction between leading or trailing trends because of their intersecting trends. Instead, in partially converging countries beliefs start higher, dip lower, and finally align once again with narratives, showing instances of leading resonance, where beliefs tend to align with narratives over time. Finally, diverging countries do not show any form of resonant context because while being the most misaligned (i.e., having the strongest potential for resonance), they do not show any sign of potential resolution toward alignment.

6. Discussion

In this article, we set to achieve three goals: to introduce the concept of recurrent events as an integral part of the event literature, to adopt resonance as a theoretical lens through which to study the relationship between narratives present at recurrent events and social beliefs, and to provide an empirical proof-of-concept by focusing on Eurovision as a specific case of mediated recurrent events. To do so, we analyzed data about event narratives and social beliefs in 18 European countries over the 40-year period between 1981 and 2021.

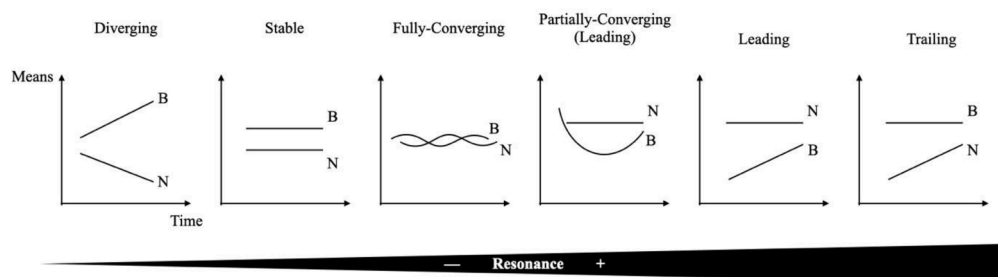
Our empirical findings illustrate the necessity to move beyond dualistic views of events in relation to recurrent events. We find six different constellations of cultural change: diverging, stable, fully-converging, partially-converging (leading), leading, and trailing. Table 2, below, lists the countries in each constellation and Fig. 3 provides a visual representation, graphed in order from least to highest potential for resonance.

While an exhaustive accounting of the trajectories in each country is beyond the scope of this article, our analyses place these constellations along a continuum ranging from the lowest (i.e., diverging) to the highest (i.e., leading/trailing) potential for resonance. Starting from the constellation with the least amount of resonance, a *diverging* constellation represents contexts where narratives and beliefs diverge over time (e.g., Belgium and France for sexual and gender identity). Note that country cases represent both sides of the consensus around the focal issue, one broadly supportive (e.g., the Netherlands about sexual and gender identity) whereas the other is quite antithetical (e.g., Turkey about sexual and gender identity). For example, while the narratives of Eurovision songs in Turkey become increasingly supportive of sexual and gender identity, this support is absent from public opinion (Brewer, 2014). Alternatively, the broad public support for sexual and gender identity in the Netherlands (Jaspers et al., 2007) is paired, over time, by a stable and slightly declining support for this topic as expressed in lyrics. In both cases, the consensus around these issues, either in terms of broad support or broad opposition, could mean that diverging countries lack the social conflict necessary to ignite a potential convergence. In this sense, although they represent opposite situations, these two cases might indicate a similar lack of resonance in countries with diverging trends.

Stable and fully converging constellations represent situations of transition where social beliefs and narratives transition toward resonant contexts. A *stable* constellation (e.g., Denmark and Sweden for sexual and gender identity) refers to countries where both social beliefs and narratives show stability over time, yet seemingly without interacting with one other. While they can potentially develop into resonant contexts, these countries show an alignment between narratives and beliefs that might indicate the lack of a felt need for change (Jakobsson et al., 2013). The two Scandinavian countries resemble the case of the Netherlands for sexual and gender identity, the main difference being the lower degree of fluctuation and the higher degree of proximity between narratives and beliefs present in the former.

In contrast, a *fully converging* constellation (e.g., Portugal and Spain for national identity) represents entangled situations of resonance, where it is difficult to disentangle the leading or trailing nature of narratives in relation to social beliefs, but both are strictly intertwined. Fully converging constellations might represent cases where previously stable contexts develop into more resonant ones. Note that we uniquely find fully converging constellations in relation to the topic of national identity in countries like Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain. Existing research suggests that neoliberal pressures (Mijs et al., 2016) and populist political agendas (Berezin, 2009) may have been crucial to create the conditions for cultural change in these countries. Neoliberalism might have brought economic conditions, such as wage pressures and higher competition in the job market, coupled with broader phenomena linked to globalization (e.g., immigration, technological advancement, cultural diffusion), that fueled nationalistic and protectionist beliefs (Oesch, 2008). The constant fluctuations we registered between narratives and beliefs on this topic might emerge from such social conflict, where established narratives and counter-frames repeatedly challenge each other. The saliency of the topic of national identity in these countries signals conditions of unrest, where alignment and misalignment are continuously negotiated. Fully converging constellations might therefore capture transitioning contexts, where narratives and beliefs constantly fluctuate around each other.

Finally, resonant countries can be grouped into three constellations, namely partially converging, leading, and trailing. A *partially converging* constellation (e.g., Germany and Ireland for sexual and gender identity) represents specific situations of leading resonance, where social beliefs are initially more progressive than narratives, subsequently dipping and converging towards the end of the period. *Leading* (e.g., Italy and Malta for sexual and gender identity) and *trailing* (e.g., Sweden and Switzerland for national identity) countries



Note: B = beliefs, N = narratives

Fig. 3. Schematic representation of resonant constellation.

Note: B= beliefs, N= narratives.

are those where narratives present at Eurovision are clear forerunners or followers, respectively, of existing social beliefs. As previously mentioned, our study cannot assess the *effects* of such resonant contexts. Yet extant research finds that these resonant contexts can have potentially wide-ranging implications for cultural change (Ariely & Zahavi, 2022). As suggested by Leibetseder (2022, p. 2), the victory of the Italian band Måneskin in 2021 (in a leading country, in relation to sexual and gender identity), with their “glamrock performances playing with gender nonconformity and queer sexual orientation” is part of a long history of queering music and culture, which has been shown to have important implications for individuals’ rejection of pathologizing LGBTQ+ identities (Boggan et al., 2017). Nevertheless, it remains open for debate whether such changes happen first in society and ‘trickle down’ into cultural products, or the other way around. More generally, as suggested by Yair (2019, p. 1023), Eurovision can be seen as a “cultural seismograph [that] exposes deep national traumas and cultural conflicts.” Our findings provide a first account of how to study mediated recurrent events, such as Eurovision, as “cultural seismographs.”

7. Conclusion

In sum, our findings provide two contributions to the sociological literature about events. First, we isolated a specific class of event—recurrent events—to theorize about its distinctive characteristics compared to unexpected and non-recurrent planned events. Aspects such as their repetition, planning, and regularity are crucial to differentiate recurrent from unexpected and non-recurrent planned events as well as, more broadly, to better understand processes of cultural diffusion and (re)production.

While most of the existing literature has focused on unexpected events, as happenings that prompt the re-articulation of social structures (Mijis et al., 2022; van Dooremalen, 2021), the focus on recurrent events allows for a study of cultural change that is more sensitive to gradual, multi-directional, and non-linear temporal changes. By recognizing the embeddedness of events within the flow of social life, the approach developed in this paper can account for the specificity of recurrent events, detecting constellations of change that map different configurations of the embedding and mobilizing nature of events. That is, rather than expecting sudden and radical changes to happen right after the event, a strategy frequently pursued in the sociological literature about events (van Dooremalen & Uitermark, 2021), our approach is open to a wider range of temporal developments than pre-/post- approaches and to the co-constitutive construction of the social world, something that is particularly important in relation to recurrent events.

Second, and related, we have endeavored to bring resonance theory (McDonnell et al., 2017) in conversation with the literature on events as a theoretically generative framework to understand the thorny issue of the duality of events. Resonant contexts are those where the misalignment between social beliefs and narratives generates the potential for re-articulating existing cultural configurations, either in terms of novel narratives or novel social beliefs (McDonnell et al., 2017, p. 3; Zilberstein et al., 2023). In this article, we adopted a socio-cultural rather than an individual perspective, focusing on the detection of potentially resonant contexts. Importantly, this approach allows for a move beyond the leading/trailing dichotomy to paint a more complex picture. Specifically, we uncovered six constellations of cultural change and maintenance. These constitute an important finding for future research about events, and recurrent events in particular. Our findings add nuance about the duality of events and further corroborate the need to move beyond pre/post-measures to capture co-constitutive relationships with social beliefs. They also provide new directions to further theorize the relationship between events’ narratives and social beliefs.

We envision four ways in which to build on resonance theory to advance our understanding of how events pattern and are patterned by social life. This can be done by studying (1) the type of beliefs and narratives studied (i.e., misalignment), (2) the nature of the event (i.e., recurrent / non-recurrent planned / unexpected, mediated / non-mediated), (3) its cultural context (e.g., national or class differences), and (4) the polarization around the topic (i.e., degree of misalignment). Resonance theory departs from the assumption that cultural change occurs through fluctuations between misalignment and alignment. Such fluctuations might depend on the topic under examination and on the level of polarization and conflict surrounding the issue. For example, topics such as police brutality could equally be perceived as cogent and actual by people living in France and Denmark, although with different perceptions of safety and levels of trust (Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2012; Nägel & Lutter, 2023). This further suggests the necessity to contextualize the role of the topic studied within culturally specific contexts. Moreover, different classes of events might spur different reactions depending on the nature of the event itself. As illustrated in this article and in other recent accounts of events (e.g., Berezin, 2012; van Dooremalen, 2021), social life is patterned by a multitude of classes of events. While this literature has only recently started to account for such a multifaceted composition, it is important to recognize that the co-constitutive relationship between events’ narratives and social beliefs is highly contingent on the class of event studied. For example, large mediated events such as the Olympics can be expected to have a qualitative and quantitative relationship with social beliefs that is significantly different from those of smaller scale sport events, even if mediatized (e.g., matches within national leagues). Similarly, recurrent events can bring about different consequences compared to unexpected events because of the different expectations and anticipation preceding them.

We therefore encourage future research to further explore the study of resonance in relation to events. For example, future studies could more precisely measure the role of specific events (e.g., mediated recurrent events) for audiences’ identities, tracking the fluctuations between social beliefs and narratives at the individual and cultural level. Doing so would shed new light on the role of events as embedded within existing social beliefs (e.g., among whom is the event relevant? Which identity aspects are the most relevant?) while also mobilizing novel ways to puzzle out situations of misalignment (e.g., what novel frames does the event provide to audiences? How is the event used to re-articulate existing issues?). We hope that this article has provided valuable ground to inspire such research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Luca Carbone: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Project

administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jonathan Mijs:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Thijs van Dooremalen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Stijn Daenekindt:** Software, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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